

# *Sonoma Coast State Beach* *Preliminary General Plan &* *Draft Environmental Impact Report*

*California Department of Parks and Recreation*  
*January 2007*



# *Sonoma Coast State Beach*

## *Preliminary General Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Report*

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January 8, 2007

All Interested Agencies, Organizations, and Persons

## **NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY**

### **SONOMA COAST STATE BEACH**

### **PRELIMINARY GENERAL PLAN / DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT**

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A draft environmental impact report (EIR) has been prepared by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (Department) for the Sonoma Coast State Beach Preliminary General Plan (General Plan). The Department is the lead agency, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), responsible for preparation of this document.

#### **Project Location:**

Sonoma Coast State Beach extends approximately 19 miles from Bodega Head in the vicinity of Bodega Bay to beyond the Vista Trail, located 4 miles north of the coastal community of Jenner in Sonoma County. It also extends inland, encompassing the Willow Creek watershed and portions of the lower watershed of the Russian River. A 3,378-acre acquisition of the Upper Willow Creek and lower Freezeout Creek watersheds was added to the unit in 2005. Park ownership now encompasses approximately 80 percent of the Willow Creek watershed, a major tributary to the Russian River.

#### **Project Description:**

The purpose of the proposed project is to develop a General Plan guiding future management and development at Sonoma Coast State Beach. Sonoma Coast State Beach provides various recreational opportunity including hiking, horseback riding, surfing, camping, scenic driving, rock climbing, whale watching, wildlife viewing, picnicking, and beachcombing.

The General Plan contains a comprehensive and cohesive set of park-wide and zone-specific goals and guidelines for the long-term direction of the Sonoma Coast State Beach. Two park management zones are identified in the plan, providing detailed direction tailored to the particular environmental resource characteristics of each zone. The two zones – Coastline Management Zone and Inland Watershed Management Zone - provide high-quality park experiences for visitors while enhancing and preserving features that make the Sonoma Coast State Beach a unique destination. A number of improvements are identified in the General Plan's goals and guidelines. The Plan also proposes a change in classification from State Beach to State Park.

**Summary of Impacts:**

The EIR provides a program-level analysis of the potential environmental impacts associated with the General Plan. No significant environmental impacts would occur as a result of the proposed project.

**Public Review and Comment Period:**

The 45-day public review and comment period for the Draft EIR began on January 8, 2007, and will end on February 22, 2007. Copies of the Preliminary General Plan and Draft EIR are available on the California State Park's website (<http://www.parks.ca.gov>) and at the following locations:

California State Parks, North Bay District, Russian River Sector Office  
25381 Steelhead Boulevard  
Duncans Mills, CA 95430

California State Parks, Sonoma Coast State Beach, Salmon Creek Park Office  
3095 Coast Highway 1  
Bodega Bay, CA 94923

California State Parks Armstrong Redwoods State Preserve Office  
17000 Armstrong Redwoods Road  
Guerneville, CA 95446

Sonoma County Library, Central Branch  
799 Third Street  
Santa Rosa, CA 95404

Sonoma County Library, Guerneville Regional Library  
14107 Armstrong Woods Road  
Guerneville, CA 95446

Sonoma County Library, Sebastopol Regional Library  
7140 Bodega Avenue  
Sebastopol, CA 95472

**Submission of Public Comment:**

Please submit comments in writing to the following address:

California Department of Parks and Recreation  
Planning Division  
P.O. Box 942896  
Sacramento, CA 94296-0001  
Contact: Dave Keck, Supervisor, General Plan Section

Public comment letters must be postmarked by **February 22, 2007**.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **DESCRIPTION OF SONOMA COAST STATE BEACH**

Since its incorporation into the California Department of Parks and Recreation's (the Department's) State Parks system in 1934 and its classification as a state beach in 1964, Sonoma Coast State Beach (SB) has become one of the most visited state parks in California. It is known for its rugged coastline, sandy coves, sweeping ocean vistas, and a variety of other natural, cultural, and recreational resources. Sonoma Coast SB stretches for 19 miles along the Sonoma County coastline from Bodega Head at the southern end to beyond the Vista Point, located 4 miles north of the coastal community of Jenner. It also extends inland, encompassing the Willow Creek watershed and portions of the lower watershed of the Russian River.

### **PURPOSE FOR GENERAL PLAN**

Despite the heavy and increasing visitation experienced by Sonoma Coast SB, no new recreational facilities have been developed since the Pomo Canyon Campground opened in 1990. At the same time, unique and important natural and cultural resources that warrant additional levels of protection and restoration have been identified at Sonoma Coast SB. Since the adoption of the Interim Management Plan in 1984, several new properties have been added to Sonoma Coast SB and additional acquisitions are being considered. Recognition of these and other issues prompted the preparation of this Preliminary General Plan (the Plan) and Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR), which provides a long-term management approach and a planning framework with which the various management challenges facing Sonoma Coast SB today would be addressed. As an EIR, the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements must be addressed and the Plan must also identify where these requirements are met. This information can be found in Appendix C.

### **APPROACH TO THE PRELIMINARY GENERAL PLAN**

The Plan reflects the Department's dual mandates as the stewards of sensitive resources and the providers of recreational opportunities. The protection and restoration of natural and cultural resources are key components of the Plan. The Plan includes goals and guidelines aimed at biological resources and water quality protection, the preservation of scenic and cultural resources, recreation and interpretive opportunities, and facility improvements and potential construction of new developments in response to heavy and growing visitation, environmental constraints, and recent and expected near-term property acquisitions.

The Plan considers the appropriate carrying capacity of Sonoma Coast SB with regard to resource protection and the desired high-quality visitor experiences. It emphasizes the importance of long-term sustainability, the use of environmental indicators, and adaptive management practices. It is acknowledged that achieving the stated vision of the Plan would be realized incrementally, as funding becomes available, and would be completed over time through daily operational actions taken by Department staff.

## PLANNING PROCESS

A thorough analysis of existing conditions and concerns was the first step undertaken during the planning process. A set of key planning issues was obtained through consultation with the public, interested organizations, and local, State, and federal agencies, via a survey, a public meeting, and a notice letter. The identified issues include appropriateness of various recreational activities, protection of sea mammals and other wildlife species, preservation of important archaeological resources, inadequacy of day-use and overnight recreational facilities, water quality improvement, and grassland management. At the same time, information regarding the physical characteristics of Sonoma Coast SB was collected and analyzed, including the compilation of a geographic information system (GIS) database of the natural and cultural resources present at Sonoma Coast SB with use of existing data and field survey results. The resulting data was used to help make informed decisions regarding environmental constraints to development.<sup>1</sup>

The second step, which began with consideration of the broadest planning objective (e.g., Mission of the Department and Unit Classification) consisted of vision definition and implementation for Sonoma Coast SB. A vision was developed, and the existing declaration of purpose was revised, to reflect the updated knowledge of the resources at Sonoma Coast SB and the understood significance and value of Sonoma Coast SB with respect to recreation and educational opportunities for the region and for the State. Planning concepts, such as goals and guidelines, management zones, potential development areas, and management plans, were developed to achieve the vision. Public input regarding the vision and the planning concepts was obtained through a survey and a public meeting and incorporated into the Plan. During the course of this planning process, the inland 3,378-acre Upper Willow Creek acquisition was completed and added to the park. This addition significantly increased the size of the park, the diversity of park resources, the recreation opportunities, as well as expanded the character of the park by increasing the significance of inland areas. The planning effort incorporated this addition and refined plan concepts, goals, and guidelines as a continuation of the initial planning process. Additional public meetings were included to provide opportunities for public input on the Willow Creek area. As a result of this significant expansion of the park, the Plan recommends reclassification of this park unit from a State Beach to a State Park.

The third major step in the planning process consisted of the environmental analysis and the consideration of alternatives. The Plan includes an Environmental Impact Report that identifies the potential environmental effects of the General Plan, consistent with requirements of the CEQA. The Plan establishes resource-specific management guidelines in order to become a “self-mitigating” plan, designed to avoid, reduce, or minimize environmental impacts of proposed facilities to a less-than-significant level. Based on the environmental analyses, alternatives were developed and considered for the purpose of minimizing impacts to the extent feasible. The opportunity for public review of this Preliminary General Plan/Draft

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<sup>1</sup> The GIS database developed for this General Plan is available for continued Departmental use.

EIR is also provided during the CEQA process. The CEQA environmental review process and the opportunity provided for written comment are described in Section 4.1 of this document.

## **SUMMARY AND STRUCTURE OF THE PLAN**

The Plan consists of four main sections: (1) introduction; (2) existing conditions and issues analysis; (3) the “Plan” component (e.g., goals and guidelines); and the (4) environmental analysis.

Chapter 2 includes information on existing conditions, as well as issues identified through public and agency scoping efforts, as described above.

Some of the goals and guidelines comprising Chapter 3 require the preparation of specific management plans and other investigations or programs subsequent to the adoption of the Plan, including the following:

- ▶ participate in regional conservation plans (NAT-1H),
- ▶ conduct resource monitoring and condition assessments (NAT-1A, NAT-1J, NAT-2B, NAT-2C),
- ▶ conduct additional studies prior to site-specific development (REC-1G),
- ▶ explore the feasibility of developing a new visitor center (EDU-1C),
- ▶ develop a comprehensive roadway management plan (ROAD-1A),
- ▶ conduct traffic studies for proposed access points in the Willow Creek watershed (ROAD-1H)
- ▶ develop a trails management plan (TRAIL-1A),
- ▶ conduct project-specific geotechnical analyses (FAC-1H),
- ▶ conduct noise studies (FAC-1I),
- ▶ prepare erosion control plans (COAST-2C),
- ▶ conduct site-specific resource studies and further evaluate opportunities for appropriate overnight visitor facilities. (Inland-1G).

Preparation and implementation of the management plans and investigations or programs may be required before certain management actions may take place. Additional management plans may be prepared when determined to be necessary by the Department.

The goals and guidelines also delineate 10 potential development areas within Sonoma Coast SB (see Exhibit 3-1) that have been determined to be the most appropriate for considering future facilities development and improvements, which may include the following:

- ▶ visitor center,
- ▶ environmental campgrounds,
- ▶ campgrounds,
- ▶ alternative overnight facilities,
- ▶ day-use areas,
- ▶ administrative and operational center,
- ▶ multi-use trails and coastal access,
- ▶ inland watershed trails system,
- ▶ primary visitor access point for Inland Management Zone,
- ▶ secondary visitor access point for Inland Management Zone,
- ▶ potential or authorized visitor access for other areas in Inland Management Zone,
- ▶ bike paths and trails,
- ▶ boat launch facility,
- ▶ scenic viewpoints,
- ▶ parking areas, and/or
- ▶ staff housing near inland access points for park surveillance and security.

The Plan further includes site selection criteria (Table 3-1), that will be applied to determine specific sites within the larger potential development areas that would be most suitable for development or improvement.

The environmental analysis and the consideration of alternatives contained in the Plan were prepared in conformance with CEQA. The environmental analysis is programmatic in scope and serves as a first tier EIR as defined in Section 15166 of the CEQA guidelines. It does not contain project-specific analysis for the facilities that are considered in the Plan but analyzes broad environmental matters and is a reference for future environmental documents that will provide more detailed information and analysis for site specific developments and projects.

The Plan also includes guidelines that govern project-level environmental review of site-specific projects to avoid or minimize potential adverse site-specific effects to some resources during construction or operations of the facilities and improvements. Specific projects would also undergo subsequent CEQA review as appropriate. Because the Plan contains goals and guidelines that are designed to avoid or minimize potential adverse environmental effects, no significant program-level impacts were identified. Based on the environmental analysis, the Preferred Alternative was determined to be the environmentally superior alternative because it allows for greatest flexibility in the consideration of environmentally superior development sites while excluding sites with the greatest environmental constraints.